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Public and published opinion

NO practitioner and no theoretician of political life and activity would seriously dispute that public opinion is an enormous power – not only in a democracy, but even to a certain extent in the communist totalitarian states. Governments have to take it into consideration and disregard it at their own risk.

One of the most topical examples is illustrated by the fact that the Swiss Government would like the country to apply for membership of the United Nations but, fearing a negative vote from the population, does not dare to submit the question to a referendum. No government – in Britain or in Switzerland for that matter – could really govern against public opinion for any length of time.

Since public opinion exercises so much power and has such influence, the question naturally arises: "What exactly is public opinion?" Professor Siegfried Frey, the former managing director of the Swiss Telegraph Agency and lecturer at the universities of Zürich and Berne, gave a definition of public opinion some years ago which, I think, cannot be improved upon.

According to him, public opinion in the widest sense of the term is "The general direction of thinking of the masses, or the

public." In addition, it has, according to Professor Frey, always been uncertain whether public opinion is to a greater extent expressed in, or shaped by, the media.

It is in my experience an oversimplification to say that public opinion and published opinion are identical. Thus I have seen it time and again, both in Britain and in Switzerland, that friends of mine knew the opinion of their favourite newspaper on a particular subject, but had nevertheless come to conclusions of their own and formed their own opinion.

On the other hand it is also true that in view of the frequency of federal, cantonal and borough votes and elections, some people I know do not bother to study the proposals but simply glance at their paper to see what it or their favourite political party recommend.

As far as Britain is concerned several examples in her recent history show what enormous power a combination of public

and published opinion can wield. Perhaps the best known of them was the Suez adventure of October 1956, which followed Nasser's nationalisation of the Suez Canal.

Anthony Eden, later the Earl of Avon, was prime minister at that time and is known to have said: "This means Nasser or I will have to go." Together with the French and Israelis, but only with the agreement of part of his Cabinet, he started a military campaign against Egypt which was ill conceived from its beginning.

Eden, formerly a brilliant foreign secretary and negotiator, but later a bad prime minister, counted on the support of Hugh Gaitskill, then leader of the opposition as well as of public opinion.

But he had, alas, totally misjudged the situation. No sooner had British bombers started bombing the canal zone when an enormous wave of public indignation began to manifest itself. It was lead by the two archbishops, by The Times and the Guardian,

as well as by the trade unions which were then meeting in Brighton, and by the Labour Opposition.

They were all indignant because Britain had clearly committed an aggression in reacting against a provocation. It would have needed a much stronger and healthier man than Eden – a Churchill in fact – to stand up to such pressure.

And when President Eisenhower and Secretary of State Dulles added their voices and Bulganin and Kruschchow threatened to atom-bomb London, Britain's prime minister collapsed and stopped the British forces half way down the canal.

He resigned soon afterwards and left the country for several weeks leave in Bermuda, a tragic figure and broken man. Public and published opinion had proved to be stronger than he.

How, one may ask, is it possible to find out what public opinion thinks or feels about a particular problem?

To begin with there is the famous "man in the street." He may be the hairdresser, the gardener, the milkman, the news-vendor, the postman or the petrol pump attendant. If one of them starts talking about a political issue and leaves Wimbledon or the latest cricket score or jewel robbery alone, then you know that public opinion itself has talked to you.

In addition there is always the pub, there are readers' letters, public speakers, brains trusts, television discussions and public opinion polls, and most political parties receive reports from their political agents who themselves have been talking to people in the pub and club.

Public opinion, even though it can not be measured in litres, gallons, inches, miles or any other measure, metric or otherwise, is nevertheless an enormous power.

It can sweep away foreign secretaries – as was the case when Sir Samuel Hoare had to resign over the scandal of the Hoare-Laval deal concerning Abyssinia. It can even lead to the abdication of a King – as it did when Edward VIII wanted to marry Mrs Wallis Simpson morganatically.

Public opinion is, to conclude, something so powerful that no organisation, no government, can afford to ignore it for any length of time.

Gottfried Keller

THE ARTS

HUGUES Cuenod, the distinguished tenor artist who will be giving master classes at Trinity College of Music this month, was born in Vevey, Switzerland.

His long and varied career began in London in 1926 when he appeared in the Noël Coward musical *Bitter Sweet*.

He spent the war in Switzerland, teaching at the Geneva Conservatoire.

After the war he sang in Italy, at La Scala and in Naples, and at Stravinsky's personal request he appeared in the first performance of *The Rake's Progress* in Venice, which led to his first appearance at Glyndebourne in the same role (Sellem, the Auctioneer) in 1954.

Since then he has sung at Glyndebourne every year except one and his appearances there have included many unforgettable character roles such as Don Basilio in *Le Nozze di Figaro*, Dr Caius in *Falstaff*, The Dancing

Master in *Ariadne auf Naxos*, Lucano in *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, Monsieur Taupe in *Capriccio*, Monsieur Triqué in *Eugene Onegin*, and the travesty roles of the nurse Erice in Cavalli's *L'Ormindo*.

Events this month:

Zurich Chamber Orchestra play in following concerts:

Thursday, October 1 at 8pm, Royal Naval Chapel, Greenwich. (Works by Händel, Martin, Bach, Mozart and Pergolesi) with Yehudi Menuhin, violin.

Friday, October 2 at 8pm, Royal Festival Hall. (Works by Händel, Martin, Bach, Mozart and Pergolesi) with Yehudi Menuhin, violin.

Saturday, October 3 at 7.30pm, School Hall, Monmouth. (Works by Pergolesi, Rameau, Bartok, Elgar and Mozart).

Sunday, October 4 at 8pm, Town Hall, Oxford. (Works by Händel, Albinoni, Bartok, Elgar

and Mozart).

Tamas Vasary, piano, is the soloist and conductor in the following concerts with the Northern Sinfonia:

Wednesday, October 7 at 7.30pm, St Cuthberts Church, Carlisle.

Thursday, October 8 at 7.45pm, Stockton Parish Church.

Friday, October 9 at 7.45pm, Newcastle City Hall. (Works by Beethoven).

Hugues Cuenod, tenor, gives master classes on:

Monday, October 5 to Thursday, October 8 at Trinity College of Music, Mandeville Place, London W1.

Helen Duffy, flute, performs Honegger's "Danse de la chèvre" for unaccompanied flute on:

Sunday, October 11 at 7pm, Purcell Room.

Exhibition "Paris sans fin": lithographs by A. Giacometti.

October 6 to 23, University of Warwick Library, Coventry.